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Foucault and La Boétie

The crucial problem of power is not that of voluntary servitude....¹

--Michel Foucault

la critique, cela sera l'art de l'inservitude volontaire, celui de l'indocilité réfléchie.²

--Michel Foucault

It is perhaps stating the obvious to observe that Michel Foucault left a remarkably wide-ranging critical oeuvre. Nonetheless, in the 1980s, as he worked on what would become the second and third volumes of the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault offered several retrospective accounts of what he then described as a fairly unified project, one that sought to develop the critical tools and historical perspectives necessary to understand the emergence and workings of what he had come to refer to as governmentality.³ Étienne de La Boétie, on the other hand, only

¹ Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Power*, ed. James D. Faubian, vol. 3, *Essential Works of Foucault* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 342.

² Michel Foucault, "Qu'est-Ce Que La Critique? [Critique et Aufklärung]," *Bulletin de La Société Française de Philosophie* 84, no. 2 (1990): 39.

³ In one of the most succinct of these, presented during a seminar in 1982 just two years before his death, Foucault explained that "I have attempted a history of the organization of knowledge with respect to both domination and the self. For example, I studied madness not in terms of the

left one influential and widely known text, his *Discours de la servitude volontaire*. As I have demonstrated elsewhere,⁴ however, voluntary servitude proves to be a concern in almost all of La Boétie's works from his *Mémoire sur la pacification des troubles* where he describes—if indeed he is the author—how the people “aprend à desobeyr volontiers”⁵ and his *Vingt et neuf sonnets* to his translations of Plutarch and Xenophon.

It would be impossible in the pages that follow to do justice to the many potential constellations one might construct between the work of these two thinkers. I will instead focus on a few nodes, beginning with what is as far as I know Foucault's only explicit reference to La Boétie and concluding with a brief meditation on a possible allusion to the *Discours de la Servitude volontaire* in Foucault's talk “Qu'est-ce que la critique? [critique et *Aufklärung*].”

Between these two sections I compare how power, freedom, and resistance are understood in the

criteria of formal sciences but to show what type of management of individuals inside and outside of asylums was made possible by this strange discourse. This encounter between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self I call ‘governmentality’.” See Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, vol. 1, The Essential Works of Foucault (New York: The New Press, 1997), 225. Other retrospective formulations by Foucault of his life's work include “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, vol. 1 (New York: The New Press, 1997), 281–82 and *L'usage des plaisirs*, *Histoire de La Sexualité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 10–11.

⁴ Marc Schachter, *Voluntary Servitude and the Erotics of Friendship: From Classical Antiquity to Early Modern France* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).

⁵ Étienne de La Boétie, *Mémoire sur la pacification des troubles*, ed. Malcolm Smith (Genève: Droz, 1983), 101–2.

Servitude volontaire and in several of Foucault's texts, address the potential reasons for the absence of this treatise from Foucault's meditations on governmentality, and ask whether La Boétie's translation of Xenophon's *On Household Management* might not offer a different—and potentially more constructive—point of departure for thinking La Boétie and Foucault together.

My comparison of the political thought of Foucault and several of the key ideas in La Boétie's *Servitude volontaire* will in part highlight some of the limits of the treatise's critique. This may seem unreasonable but I do think that it is important particularly because certain modern authors seem to have been “enchantés et charmés par le nom seul” of La Boétie.⁶ However much La Boétie's indictment of voluntary servitude might resonate with some of our own preoccupations—including the manufacture of consent and the constant emergence of new forms of *panem et circenses* in contemporary society—there are serious limitations that constrain the radical nature of a political critique one might find in the *Servitude volontaire* and it is worth considering them. For example, elsewhere I have discussed how “the *Servitude volontaire*'s investment in friendship, fraternity and nature at once guarantees its efficacy and its enduring popularity while limiting the range of its critique” because of what these categories enable and exclude.⁷ Intriguingly, however, as I will suggest below, La Boétie's Xenophon translation may offer an implicit rejoinder to some of the limits of the analysis offered in the better known treatise.

So far as I have been able to determine, Foucault only names La Boétie twice, both times in the same context, while responding to a 1970 article by Jean-Marc Pelorson that critiqued his

⁶ Estienne de La Boétie, *De la servitude volontaire, ou, Contr'un*, ed. Malcolm Smith (Genève: Droz, 1987), 34.

⁷ Schachter, *Voluntary Servitude and the Erotics of Friendship*, 69.

interpretation of Cervantes' *Don quixote*.⁸ Foucault's rejoinder was in large part to demonstrate that many of the claims in the article were factually inaccurate: he was accused of saying things he didn't say and of not saying things that he did say. His invocation of La Boétie appeared in the context of a discussion of a different order in which he makes an argument based in part on the evolving meaning of words as witnessed in a range of early modern texts, among them the *Servitude volontaire*: "the word *niais* designates something completely different from our present word *sot* in that phrase where La Boétie says of Claudius that he was not simply *simple* but *niais*" (86-87). Foucault's point seems to be twofold: that the meaning or usage of some of the words that he lists—*niais* for example—have changed over the years and that the lexical opposition between insanity and foolishness we now make was not always self-evident.

The passage from the *Servitude volontaire* referred to by Foucault occurs near the end of the treatise in a section where La Boétie addressed the capricious cruelty of the tyrants of old. After listing several examples, including that of Claudius' own mother, La Boétie writes:

Who was ever more easily manipulated [aisé à manier], more simple [simple], or to put it better more truly a dimwit [niais] than the Emperor Claudius ? Who was ever more infatuated by a woman than he by Messalina? In the end, he put her in into the executioner's hands. The simplemindedness [simplesse] —if that's what they have—to not know how to do good resides in tyrants. But somehow, ultimately, what little intellect [esprit] they have awakens to expedite their cruelty towards even those close to them.⁹

⁸ Jean-Marc Pelorson, "Michel Foucault et l'Espagne," *La Pensée* 152, no. August (1970): 88–99.

⁹ La Boétie, *Servitude volontaire*, 72. My translation.

I would submit that *niais* here is not tinged with some sense of madness; instead, it is effectively synonymous with *sot*. At least on this point in his response to Pelorson, Foucault was wrong. In support of this contention, I offer two pieces of evidence internal to La Boétie's text. First, the sentence within which the word *niais* appears is exemplary of a ternary rhetorical figure repeatedly used by La Boétie in which three effectively synonymous expressions appear one after the other less with a change in meaning than an increase in intensity. Second, the opposition between "simplesse" and "esprit" in the last two sentences of the passage suggests that what La Boétie was referring to by *niais* was indeed a form of *simplesse* and one moreover where *simplesse* did not denote some kind of madness.¹⁰ The point is precisely *not* that Claude was "insane" or "mad" but that he was simple-minded, naïve, and seemingly tractable—before putting his wife to death, despite loving her, just as other capricious tyrants murdered so many of their family members, friends, and favorites. Unlike his friend Montaigne, who for example in the chapter "On the Lame" of his *Essais* wrote that he would rather give hellebore—a treatment for mental illness—than the poison hemlock to several women who confessed to having magical powers and were accused of being witches, La Boétie does not have much to say about insanity.¹¹

¹⁰ An adverbial form of *niais* appears at another point in the *Servitude volontaire* and offers further evidence that the expression did not for La Boétie have intimations of madness: "Ainsi les peuples assotis, trouvant beaux ces passe-temps, amusés d'un vain plaisir qui leur passait devant les yeux, s'accoutumoient à servir aussi niaisement, mais plus mal, que les petits enfans qui pour voir les luisans images des livres enluminez, apprenent à lire" (*Servitude volontaire*, 58).

¹¹ Michel de Montaigne, *Les Essais*, ed. Jean Céard (Paris: Livre de Poche, 2001), 1604. A more fruitful avenue of inquiry might have addressed the word *beste* (or *bête*) and its semantic field,

Given that Foucault had read the *Servitude volontaire* carefully enough to recall a not particularly central passage in a not obviously relevant context, we might wonder why he did not engage more substantially with La Boétie elsewhere. I say this for several reasons. First, there seems to be a certain similarity between the concerns of the *Servitude volontaire* and Foucault's own project. After all, La Boétie describes—or rather laments—a situation in which men voluntarily obey without external coercion: “Is is ... the peoples who let themselves, or rather make themselves, be abused, because by ceasing to serve they would be freed from servitude.”¹² In works like *Surveiller et punir*, Foucault was concerned with the production of docile bodies whose disciplined obedience would not require force.¹³ The answer La Boétie proposed to voluntary servitude was the emancipation of the besotted mind that would then withdraw consent: “And you can be freed from so many indignities that beasts themselves would either not feel Et de tant d’indignités que les bestes mesmes ou ne les sentiroient point, ou ne l’endureroient point, vous pouvés vous en delivrer si vous l’essaiés, non pas de vous en delivrer, mais seulement de le vouloir faire. Soiés resolu de ne servir plus, et vous voila libres” (40). In a passage from *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault provocatively suggested that there “is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself.”¹⁴

although here too I am not sure the *Servitude volontaire* offers good evidence for Foucault's argument about the labile lexicon of madness. I hope to address the figure of the beast in the *Servitude volontaire* in a future essay.

¹² La Boétie, *Servitude volontaire*, 38.

¹³ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1979).

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Graham Burchell, Lectures at the College de France (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 252. In a

And yet their projects are actually quite different, these apparent similarities notwithstanding. As the epigraph for this essay suggests, voluntary servitude—whether to an oppressive government, an institution, or an individual—was not in and of itself one of Foucault’s key preoccupations. Instead, Foucault sought to trace transformations in the interlinked modalities of power and knowledge often with an eye to understanding how they shaped and governed subjects whether through technologies of domination or of the self. By comparison, while the verve with which La Boétie indicts men’s willing collaboration in their own disenfranchisement may be without precedent, his analysis of the ruses of power is essentially entirely constructed of precursors and arguably contains nothing new. Moreover,

very late interview, Foucault was asked about this claim: “In your lectures on the hermeneutics of the subject there is a passage in which you say that the first and only useful point of resistance to political power is the relationship of the self to the self.” Foucault’s response is perhaps relevant in the present context: “I do not believe that the only possible point of resistance to political power—understood, of course, as a state of domination—lies in the relationship of the self to the self. I am saying that ‘governmentality’ implies the relationship of the self to itself, and I intend this concept of ‘governmentality’ to cover the whole range of practices that constitute, define, organize, and instrumentalize the strategies that individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other. ...[I]f you try to analyze power not on the basis of freedom, strategies, and governmentality, but on the basis of the political institution, you can only conceive of the subject as a subject of law.... On the other hand, I believe that the concept of governmentality makes it possible to bring out the freedom of the subject and its relationship to others....” See Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 299–300.

what interested Foucault about emerging modalities of power was not first and foremost their potential role in the state's maintenance of its authority, as Roland Bleiker reminds us in a discussion of superficial similarities between Foucault's thought and that of La Boétie.¹⁵ This is not to say that Foucault ignored the importance of the state. Rather, Foucault contended that the focus on the state as the great enemy entailed a lack of attention to other axes of power—many of which, he emphasized, could be tactically deployed by the state—and it was these, including the development of new forms of rationality, that most interested him. He also observed that “[I]f you try to analyze power not on the basis of freedom, strategies, and governmentality, but on the basis of the political institution, you can only conceive of the subject as a subject of law.... On the other hand, I believe that the concept of governmentality makes it possible to bring out the freedom of the subject and its relationship to others....”¹⁶ As for La Boétie, while he famously refuses to sanction any form of government—despite his dubious endorsement of the French monarchy—the focus of his critique is political consent quite narrowly construed. He wrote, for example, that “si nous vivions avec les droits que la nature nous a donné et avec les enseignemens qu'elle nous apprend, nous serions naturellement obeissans aus parens, sujets à la raison et serfs de personne” (41). We might take one's relationship to one's parents and to reason as shorthand for two vast fields of inquiry that very much interested Foucault and very much not because he thought to do so was to abandon political inquiry but rather to expand it in necessary

¹⁵ Roland Bleiker, *Popular Dissent, Human Agency and Global Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 128–30.

¹⁶ Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 300. For some succinct reflections on the importance of the state for thinking about power relations, see Foucault, “The Subject and Power.”

ways.¹⁷ Finally, Foucault did not think of power as something from which one could escape, whether by active revolt or through the withdrawal of consent. He was profoundly skeptical of liberation and of the achievement of freedom, as he made clear in a late interview:

I have always been somewhat suspicious of the notion of liberation, because if it is not treated with precautions and within certain limits, one runs the risk of falling back on the idea that there exists a human nature or base that... has been concealed, alienated, or imprisoned in and by the mechanisms of repression. According to this hypothesis, all that is required is to break these repressive deadlocks and man will be reconciled with himself, rediscover his nature or regain contact with his origin, and reestablish a full and positive relationship with himself.¹⁸

In other words, unlike the La Boétie of the *Servitude volontaire* who could write “[s]oiés résolu de ne servir plus, et vous voilà libres” (40), Foucault did not think that man could return to a

¹⁷ Not everyone sees the narrowly political focus of La Boétie’s critique of voluntary servitude in his treatise as a limitation. Miguel Abensour for example writes that “Il convient d’être autant plus sensible à la révolution laboétienne que la tentation est toujours présente parmi nous de banaliser l’idée de servitude volontaire en la voyant partout, dans les rapports intersubjectifs, dans l’amour, dans l’éducation, dans le travail, etc., et ce faisant de ne pas la percevoir là où La Boétie l’a si génialement située, dans la sphère politique.” See Miguel Abensour, “Du Bon Usage de L’hypothèse de La Servitude Volontaire?,” *Réfractations* 17, no. Winter (2006): 71–72.

¹⁸ Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 282.

prelapsarian freedom by throwing off his chains and returning to his natural state. Indeed, for Foucault, man *has* no natural state.

So what does Foucault call for instead? And can we find any more productive resonances between his thought and that found in La Boétie's *Servitude volontaire*? Although Foucault was often hesitant to speak of resistance in concrete terms—indeed, he sometimes equivocated eloquently on the limits of the language one might use to express resistance—¹⁹, on occasion he does. I will offer two such examples, one drawn from the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* and the other from the preface that Foucault penned for the English edition of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*. In the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault asked how it came to pass that people thought of their sexual liberation as the achievement of freedom. Near the end of the volume, he wrote:

We must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power; on the contrary, one tracks along the course laid out by the general deployment of sexuality. It is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim—through a tactical reversal of the various mechanisms of sexuality—to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures, and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance.²⁰

¹⁹ See for example the March 1 seminar of his *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, ed. Michel Senellart, François Ewald, and Alessandro Fontana (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

²⁰ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1*, trans. Robert J. Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 157.

In other words, fighting against sexual repression by claiming agency over one's sexuality and its expression was a way of operating within a set of power relations that had predetermined the terrain of resistance and thus not a strategy for escaping them. This did not mean that Foucault thought that resistance was futile, as this passage makes clear, but it required a strategy that operated in some kind of critical relationship to sexuality—bodies and pleasures rather than sex/desire. As has been often noted of the *Servitude volontaire*, it does not call for a revolution or propose a preferable model for the polity. Here, we might see an inkling of a parallel with the point that Foucault makes in his critique of sexual liberation. The establishment of a new political order would not escape the logic of government that of necessity would seem to raise the problem of voluntary servitude. La Boétie's solution appears to be to suspend his argument at the crux of the critique rather than attempting to sketch out a contrary logic as Foucault sometimes did.²¹

Foucault's preface to *Anti-Oedipus* offers perhaps the closest articulation in Foucault's work of a "voluntary servitude" that should be resisted. Foucault wrote that the book's "major enemy... is fascism... and not only historical fascism...but also the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very

²¹ A forceful case for the open-ended nature of La Boétie's critique such that any attempt to use it in the service of a political project would domesticate the text's radical nature has been developed in aMiguel Abensour and Michel Gauchet, "Présentation: Les Leçons de La Servitude et Leur Destin," in *De La Servitude Volontaire* (Paris: Payot, 1976), vii–xxix. See also Jean Lafond, "Le Discours de La Servitude Volontaire de La Boétie et La Rhétorique de La Déclamation," in *Mélanges Sur La Littérature de La Renaissance : À La Mémoire de V.-L. Saulnier*, Travaux D'humanisme et Renaissance (Geneva: Droz, 1984), 735–45.

thing that dominates and exploits us” (xiii).²² But even here, what he means is something very different from what we find in the *Servitude volontaire*, for example when La Boétie writes that it is the people “qui, aiant le chois ou d’estre serf ou d’estre libre, quitte sa franchise et prend le joug, qui consent à son mal ou plustot le pourchasse” (38). Once more, La Boétie is concerned with political submission, what Miguel Abensour, drawing on Pierre Clastres, refers to as the State. Crucially, the distinction between “historical fascism” and the “fascism ... in our everyday behavior” made by Foucault here points in a different direction. Describing *Anti-Oedipus* as a handbook of anti-fascist practice, Foucault provided a list of principles to be followed if one aspires to live an anti-fascist life. Among these is the following: “Do not demand of politics that it restore the ‘rights’ of the individual, as philosophy has defined them. The individual is the product of power. What is needed is to ‘de-individualize’ by means of multiplication and displacement, diverse combinations” (xiv). Elsewhere, in a related formulation that particularly foregrounded the role of the state, Foucault wrote that “the political, ethical, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state’s institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization linked to the state.”²³ In both these texts, Foucault suggested the need to turn away from an understanding of politics in terms of domination and resistance within which we think of our subjectivity or individuality as the locus from which we might resist because subjectivity and individuality are

²² Michel Foucault, “Preface,” in *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), xi–xiv.

²³ Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” 336.

themselves products of the system we should be trying to evade.²⁴ Might we locate the addressee hailed by the *Servitude volontaire* within a genealogy of the political subject critiqued by Foucault? Would it matter that La Boétie doesn't look to the State as the entity that should guarantee the rights of man but rather to Nature?

At this point, I would like to turn to a different question: why didn't Foucault discuss the *Servitude volontaire* in his work on governmentality in the sixteenth century? In the famous governmentality lecture of *Securité, territoire, population*, Foucault argued both that there was increased attention to governance in the sixteenth century and that new forms of governance began to emerge in the period. The increased attention to governance occurred across a range of axes including self-control, the education of children, pastoral care, and, he insisted perhaps least of all, "the government of the state by the prince" (88).²⁵ Foucault saw this preoccupation with governance as happening at the intersection of two movements: "the process that, dismantling feudal structures, organizes and sets up the great territorial, administrative, and colonial states" and "a completely different movement, but with complex interactions with the first... that, with the Reformation and then the Counter Reformation, questions how one wishes to be spiritually directed here on earth for one's salvation" (88-89). The resulting literature "breaks out, explodes

²⁴ The production of the individual subject was something that Foucault returned to in various ways over the years. For particularly cogent and pertinent discussions, see the section "Docile Bodies" in *Discipline and Punish* as well as Foucault's "'Omnes et Singulatim': Toward a Critique of Political Reason," in *Power*, vol. 3, 3 vols., *The Essential Works of Foucault* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 298–325.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, *Security, territory, population*.

in the middle of the sixteenth century” and then continues through to the end of the eighteenth century while undergoing a series of transformations that Foucault proposed to track (89).

With its indictment of the mystery of political consent, linked by many scholars to the centralization of the monarchic state underway in the middle of sixteenth century, La Boétie’s *Discours de la Servitude volontaire* would seem to be a part of this proliferating literature, as would his *Mémoire sur la pacification des troubles*, which offered political and religious solutions to the presence of two Christian denominations within France. Yet Foucault mentions neither in this context despite the fact that his response to Pelorson’s critique discussed above suggests a more than passing familiarity with the *Servitude volontaire*. Why not? And what might Foucault’s considerations of the texts that he *does* address tell us about La Boétie’s *Servitude volontaire* in particular?

In the pivotal lecture of *Sécurité, territoire, population*, Foucault proposed to study the early development of the emerging literature of governmentality by comparing it with Machiavelli’s *Prince*, which he contended served as a foil for a series of subsequent political treatises. Foucault noted that this literature represented the doctrine found in the *Prince* in a uniform fashion:

For Machiavelli, the Prince exists in a relationship of singularity and externality, of transcendence, to his principality. Machiavelli’s Prince receives his principality either through inheritance, or acquisition, or by conquest; in any case, he is not a part of it, but external to it. (91)²⁶

²⁶ La Boétie also identifies three ways that tyrants come to power, although not precisely the same : “les uns ont le Roiaume par election du peuple, les autres par la force des armes, les autres par succession de leur race” (44).

Most important for Foucault is that “there is no fundamental, essential, natural, and juridical connection between the Prince and his principality: externality, the Prince’s transcendence, is the principle” (91). What this means for Machiavelli is that the Prince is threatened from the outside by enemies and internally by a subjected population with no intrinsic reason to accept his rule. According to Foucault, the goal of sovereignty in the *Prince*—as construed by the anti-Machiavelli literature he was exploring—is therefore is to protect the sovereign and his control over the kingdom rather than the kingdom itself: “The object of the art of governing, the art of being Prince that Machiavelli puts forward, must be this fragile link between the prince and his principality” (92). Thus the art of governing involves the identification of dangers and the manipulation of force to enable to prince to maintain his link with the controlled territory. This art of governing is replaced in the anti-Machiavelli tracts by an insistence on the *art of government*. In a move that is familiar to us from the first volume of the history of sexuality, rather than considering this literature merely as an attempt to resist the “powerful and subversive thought” found in the *Prince*, he wanted to look at it “as a positive genre, with its specific object, concepts, and strategy.” (91) In other words, Foucault did want to think of power as theorized in terms of an art of government only as repressive or responsive but also as productive.

The work that Foucault considered in order to begin elaborating the art of governing was *Le miroir politique* by Guillaume de La Perrière. First published in 1555 in Lyon, it is roughly contemporary with the *Servitude volontaire*. Reprinted in Paris in 1567, it would eventually be translated and printed in English in the last years of the century. (I have consulted the 1567 edition.) The volume addressed a series of topics, each with its own heading and discussion, that were organized through tree-like diagrams. Foucault’s engagement with the book is actually

quite limited. His remarks all focus on one section entitled “gouvernée” found on folios 23v and 24r, the crucial part of which I have reproduced here:

GOUVERNEE.

Gouvernement presuppose ordre, d'autant que sans ordre on ne peult deument gouverner. Gouvernement est, droicte disposition des choses, desquelles on prent charge pour les conduire jusques à fin convenable : comme descrivent les Philosophes moraux et Theologiens, les noms desquels (à cause de brefueté) je tais. Gouverneur peult estre appellé tout Monarche, Empereur, Roy, Prince, Seigneur, Magistrat, Prelat, Juge, & semblable. Tout gouverneur de Royaume ou Republique doit avoir en soy, necessairement sagesse, patience, et diligence. Comme le naucher ou pilote peult (par sa folie) estre cause du naufrage de son navire : semblablement tout gouverneur de Republique ou cité, peult estre cause de la perdicion des citoyens, par son indiscretion.... Que doit avoir un bon gouverneur de Republique ? Il doit avoir extreme diligence au gouvernement de la cité, & si le bon père de famille (pour estre bon economer, c'est à-dire mesnager) doit estre en sa privee maison le premier levé, & le dernier couché, que doit faire le gouverneur de la cité, en laquelle il y a plusieurs maisons ? & le Roy, au Royaume duquel il y a plusieurs citez ? (23r-24v)²⁷

Foucault suggested that in the medieval period through to the early Renaissance, sovereignty was exercised primarily in order to maintain control over territory. The first innovation that he

²⁷ Guillaume de La Perrière, *Le miroir politique, contenant diuerses manieres de gouuerner & policer les Republiques* (Paris: Pour Vincent Norment, & Ieanne Bruneau, 1567).

highlighted in La Perrière's text was that in it the earlier model of sovereignty was no longer paramount; one now governed things ("des choses"). Foucault clarified that "I do not think that it is a matter of an opposition between things and men, but rather of showing that government is not related to the territory, but to a sort of complex of men and things" (98). Furthermore, he observed that these "things" must be led to their appropriate ends, which he distinguished from the general notion of the common good. He remarked that jurists and theologians say "that the common good exists when all subjects obey the law without fail, perform their appointed task well, practice the trades to which they are assigned, and respect the established order, insofar as this order conforms to the laws imposed by God on nature and men" (98). But with La Perrière, we see "the emergence of a new type of finality" (99)—things are governed not for the common good but for a suitable end, which can differ in order to achieve a range of goals. Foucault continues, "And one will arrange (*disposer*) things to achieve these different ends. This word '*disposer*' is important because, what enabled sovereignty to achieve its aim of obedience to the laws, was the law itself; law and sovereignty were absolutely united. Here, on the contrary, it is not a matter of imposing a law on men, but of the disposition of things, that is to say, of employing tactics rather than laws, or, of as far as possible employing laws as tactics; arranging things so that this or that end may be achieved through a certain number of means" (99). This distinction between tactics and law is crucial to understanding the power that Foucault is interested in analyzing.

Foucault also pointed out that La Perrière used the analogy of a family with a father to describe the sort of wise, benevolent rule that he was calling for. This led to an analogy between the political state and the household which altered the understanding of what it meant to govern. The model did not only imply that the head of the state should be benevolent to those dependent

on him, as in a family, but also that he should manage the state in ways analogous to the management of a household. While Foucault thought that the evolving analogy between the state and the family was part of the transformation in understandings of governance that he was tracking in the sixteenth century, he also noted that eventually it would have to be surpassed for the emergence of modern forms of governance: “The word ‘economy’ designated a form of government in the sixteenth century; in the eighteenth century, through a series of complex processes that are absolutely crucial for our history, it will designate a level of reality and a field of intervention for government” (94). Important for this development would be the rise of a concept of population as something to be managed which would lead to another crucial shift in the model that Foucault saw beginning to emerge in the sixteenth century: “The family will change from being a model to being an instrument; it will become a privileged instrument for the government of the population rather than a chimerical model for good government” (105).

Why wasn’t the *Servitude volontaire* part of this story? Perhaps because it did not partake of the developments Foucault was interested in tracing. This is for several reasons. Even if La Boétie’s motivation for writing the *Servitude volontaire* was the ongoing centralization of the monarchic state, his preoccupation with people’s collusion in their own exploitation meant that his treatise was not focused on the art of governing. He did list a range of strategies employed by tyrants to maintain their power but they are primarily variations on the *panem et circenses* theme or else linked to the diffusion of propaganda designed to increase the awe in which the tyrant is held by the populace. His examples were also all drawn from classical antiquity, even if they had contemporary analogues. Neither of these involved a shift away from the art of governing to the art of governance. If there is a trace of the art of government in La Boétie’s treatise, it would be

in La Boétie insistence on several occasions that the consequences of voluntary servitude are the devastation of one's own estate. For example, he writes:

vous semés vos fruicts afin qu'il en face le degast. Vous meublés et remplissés vos maisons, afin de fournir à ses pilleries. Vous nourrissés vos filles afin qu'il ait dequoy saouler sa luxure. Vous nourrissez vos enfans afin que pour le mieulx qu'il leur sçauroit faire, il les mene en ses guerres, qu'il les conduise à la boucherie, qu'il les face les ministres de ses convoitises et les executeurs de ses vengeancees. Vous rompés à la peine vos personnes afin qu'il se puisse mignarder en ses delices et se veautrer dans les sales et vilains plaisirs. Vous vous affoiblissés afin de le rendre plus fort et roide à vous tenir plus courte la bride. (39)

The point that La Boétie is making here is that the « vous » in question willingly participates in the depredations described, despite their resulting in the devastation of ancestral home, family, and self. While this passage could be linked to the emerging managerial thought that interested Foucault, the obsessive concern with the figure of the tyrant that appears in this and other sections of the treatise established the enemy as something far closer to the prince described by Machiavelli (as understood by the literature on government that interests Foucault) than to the emerging bureaucratic or managerial state. The image is concretized in a passage shortly after this one:

Je ne veux pas que vous le poussiés ou l'esbransliés, mais seulement ne le soustenés plus, et vous le verrés, comme un grand colosse à qui on a desrobé la base, de son pois mesme fondre en bas et se rompre. (40)

While this image might anticipate Hobbes' Leviathan, the statue being overturned is not a representation of a collective or even of a government but rather of the "one" who mysteriously holds the populace in thrall through its active collaboration in his rule. For all the innovation of the *Servitude volontaire*—an issue to which I will briefly return below—the tyrant represented in its pages does not reflect the emerging model of governance that Foucault sought to identify.

Intriguingly, however, Xenophon's *On Household Management* was involved in this emerging model of governance. La Perrière was certainly thinking of the dialogue when he addressed what the *pater familias* would have to do "pour estre bon economie, c'est à-dire mesnager," suggesting the relevance of the text for the sixteenth-century developments in governmental rationality that Foucault was interested in considering. Indeed, while Foucault suggested in the governmentality lecture that the homology between a family and a polity reflected an emerging understanding of managerial power in the sixteenth century, he would later explore the conceit's roots, taking up Xenophon's *On Household Management* for consideration in the second volume of his *History of Sexuality*. Moreover, La Boétie's own translation shows that he was in a sense using the dialogue as a point of departure for his own meditations on the problem of consent.

Near the conclusion to *On Household Management*, Socrates' careful questioning leads his interlocutor Ischomaches to acknowledge that the key to good household management is the ability to command well, and that whereas the technologies of farming and ordering the house are easily learned, the art of ruling is not. After explicitly relating the art of commanding an army to the art of managing a household, Ischomaches concludes the dialogue as follows:

Mais assure toy que ce que ie viens de dire ne s'apprent point ny pour l'auoir veu faire, ny pour l'auoir ouy dire vne fois; mais ie te dis que qui le veut sçavoir faire, il a besoin de s'y nourrir & adresser, & encore que de sa nature il soit bien nay, &, ce qui est le plus fort encore, qu'il aye ie ne sçais quoy de diuin: car ie ne peux bonnement croire que ce bien si grand puisse entierement estre propre de l'homme, mais vraiment de dieu, de commander aux personnes de telle sorte qu'il se cognoisse clairement que c'est de leur gré. [...] mais de regner sur les hommes malgré eux, cela donne il, à mon aduis, à ceux qu'il estime dignes de viure comme tantale, lequel on dit estre là bas, en enfer, languissant à tout iamais, & mourant de peur de mourir deux fois.²⁸

The French here underscores a fundamental distinction already made in the Greek between “voluntary” and “involuntary” servitude. La Boetie’s phrase “car ie ne peux bonnement croire que ce bien si grand puisse entierement estre propre de l'homme, mais vraiment de dieu, de commander aux personnes de telle sorte qu'il se cognoisse clairement que c'est de leur gré” translates the Greek, “οὐ γὰρ πάνυ μοι δοκεῖ ὅλον τοῦτὶ τὸ ἀγαθὸν ἀνθρώπινον εἶναι ἀλλὰ θεῖον,

²⁸ Estienne de La Boétie, *Oeuvres complètes d'Estienne de la Boétie*, ed. Paul Bonnefon (Bordeaux: Councouilhou, 1892), 157. It is worth noting that the conclusion to the *Servitude volontaire* makes reference to the end of Xenophon’s dialogue. See the note to the end of the *Servitude volontaire* in Smith’s edition (77n80). On La Boétie’s Xenophon translation, see also John O’Brien, “De l’Economicus a la Mesnagerie: La Boétie et Xénophon,” in *Étienne de La Boétie: Sage Révolutionnaire et Poète Périgourdin*, ed. Marcel Tetel (Paris: Champion, 2004), 45–62.

τὸ ἐθελόντων ἄρχειν” which, rendered literally into English, reads as follows: “for it does not entirely seem to me that this good is entirely human, but rather godly, the command over the willing.”²⁹ The section of the sentence following “dieu,” eighteen words in the French, translates the final three quoted Greek words, which can be rendered in English as “the command over the willing.” By expanding the account of a good ruler’s capacity for generating voluntary servitude, La Boétie underscores the fact that Ischomaches’s comparison is between, on the one hand, a conscious voluntary servitude and, on the other, involuntary servitude or tyranny. This reminds us of the degree to which Xenophon’s text is not only about commanding but also and more particularly about how to produce consent, how to rule so that those ruled “know clearly that it is by their agreement,” be it in the *oikos* or the *polis*.

It is of course precisely this distinction that La Boétie finds pernicious in the *Servitude volontaire*, at least in the political sphere. Xenophon’s interest in exploring the production of consent also addresses many questions eschewed by La Boétie in the *Servitude volontaire*. Unlike La Boétie’s treatise, in which what it might mean to be free is not at issue, where liberty is understood almost exclusively in relationship to political authority, and where freedom is described as something that might be acquired merely by being able to say “no” to the demand of submission, Xenophon’s dialogue considers what it means to be free, and addressing servitude in multiple analogous contexts (in relationship to unbridled passions as well as marriage, slavery, estate management, pedagogy, and only at the end the *polis*) where freedom results only from an ongoing struggle for self-mastery. Xenophon’s dialogue also relates self-governance to the capacity for acquiring the consent of others, a dimension as we have just seen that is curiously

²⁹ Xenophon, “Οἰκονομικός,” in *Xenophontis Opera Omnia*, 2nd ed., vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1921), sec. 21.12.

underscored in La Boétie's translation in but one of several intriguing divergences from the Greek.³⁰

Might considering voluntary servitude more comprehensively in La Boétie's oeuvre—including apparent contradictions as well as a much wider ambit of reflection spanning the care of the self and intersubjective relationships in addition to political rule—be a promising direction for future inquiry? To do so would be to displace or at least to understand differently many of the elements that have made the *Servitude volontaire* such a politically productive and provocative text—but it might also allow us to think more carefully about the limitations of the critique found in the treatise in ways that parallel Foucault's late turn to the care of the self as a continuation—rather than an abandonment—of his earlier, more obviously political work.

Conclusion

Without denying the power of the clarion call that is La Boétie's indictment of voluntary servitude, I have suggested above through a comparison to Foucault's thought that the political project described in the *Servitude volontaire*—insofar as there is one—is rather limited. Some have argued that it is precisely La Boétie's apparent refusal to countenance any form of government, even consensual, that makes the text profoundly radical, and such a seemingly

³⁰ For a more sustained discussion of La Boétie's translations see Chapter Two of my *Voluntary Servitude and the Erotics of Friendship*. Elements of my discussion of the Xenophon translation are drawn from this earlier work.

open-ended critique certainly has its appeal.³¹ At the same time, I fear that even this critique is quite narrow insofar as it remains primarily concerned with state power.³² But there is another equally audacious dimension to La Boétie's treatise which I have not been able to address above, one however that operates less at the level of its political program and more at the level of its voluntary inservitude to the intellectual traditions engaged with in the text. I mentioned earlier that La Boétie's *Servitude volontaire* was filled with examples from antiquity that seemed unlikely places to find novel analyses of political power. But the way La Boétie *uses* some of his classical sources is a different matter. By opening his critique of political consent with a quote from Homer that was repeatedly evoked to support the monarchy—and using that quotation to suggest that supporting the monarchy was a matter of expediency rather than conviction—La

³¹ See for example Pierre Clastres, "Liberté, Malencontre, Innommable," in *De La Servitude Volontaire* (Paris: Payot, 1976), 229–46.

³² Pressed on his skepticism about liberation during an interview entitled "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," Foucault responded: "I am not trying to say that liberation as such, or this or that form of liberation, does not exist: when a colonized people attempts to liberate itself from colonizers, this is indeed a practice of liberation in the strict sense. But we know very well, and moreover in this specific case, that this practice of liberation is not in itself sufficient to define the practices of freedom that will still be needed if this people, this society, and these individuals are to be able to define admissible and acceptable forms of existence or political society. This is why I emphasize practices of freedom over processes of liberation; again, the latter indeed have their place, but they do not seem to me to be capable by themselves of defining all the practical forms of freedom" (282-3).

Boétie turns a commonplace on its head while also suggesting to us the care with which we should read the ensuing pages.³³ In more subtle ways, La Boétie's version of *On Household Management* repeatedly bucks tradition to draw the dialogue within the ambit of his own critical interests. We might link these dynamics to Foucault's observation in a 1978 talk entitled "Qu'est-ce que la critique? [critique et *Aufklärung*]" that "la critique, c'est le mouvement par lequel le sujet se donne le droit d'interroger la vérité sur ses effets de pouvoir et le pouvoir sur ses discours de vérité; ... la critique, cela sera l'art de l'inservitude volontaire, celui de l'indocilité réfléchie."³⁴ It would not be too much of a stretch to imagine that Foucault was thinking of La Boétie when he coined the expression "l'inservitude volontaire," particularly since he was in large part reflecting on critique in the sixteenth century in the talk. The "inservitude volontaire" in question is not the project called for by La Boétie in his treatise—insofar as advocating for a withdrawal of consent can be considered a project. It had more to do with a kind of intellectual insubordination. Perhaps one question for those of us interested in mobilizing the *Servitude volontaire* in the hope that it will encourage critical disobedience on the part of its readers would be how best to activate—and augment—its intellectual lessons which arguably are far more radical than its oft-fetishized political program.

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³³ Marc Schachter, *Voluntary Servitude and the Erotics of Friendship: From Classical Antiquity to Early Modern France* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 59–61.

³⁴ Foucault, "Qu'est-Ce Que La Critique? [Critique et *Aufklärung*]," 39.

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